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# WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

## ADDRESSES TO YOUNG MEN

BY

MARCUS DODS

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1896

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# THE TRIALS OF YOUTH

'IT is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.' To bear the yoke is to be in subjection: to be compelled to walk in certain lines at the will of another, to be prevented from choosing for ourselves and being our own masters. The compulsion which is most commonly felt in youth is the compulsion of circumstances. Without being in absolute poverty, the majority of young men find that they have no choice, but must at once try to earn a livelihood. And the limita-

tions thus prescribed by circumstances are often very serious, and press very heavily on the mind of the aspiring youth; he is compelled to take what offers in the way of work, and to forego such occupations as he might have preferred; his education must be curtailed, however much he may long for the training a University curriculum gives; he has in many cases to postpone marriage, and finds that the neediness of relatives makes it impossible for him to lay up even the small sum which might eventually enable him somewhat to spread his wings. In fact, many young men find themselves born into most unfavourable circumstances

so far as their prospects in life go, and they can see nothing before them but years of unremitting and uncongenial toil.

Still, if there is a spark of real manhood, a leaven of generosity in the spirit, it will be found good to bear this yoke. To throw a boy into the water is a rough-and-ready lesson in the art of swimming, but with a boy of spirit it is likely to be successful. The training which straitened circumstances give is one which no money can purchase. It is true enough that many rich men's sons do well and work as hard as if they were entirely dependent on their own exertions. There are

natures which do not need the spur of poverty, but have in themselves eagerness and incentive enough. It is also true that the advantages of education which wealth affords are not to be despised. But advantages of a different, if not of a superior kind, are present in circumstances where restriction and compulsion are always felt. A lad is put upon his mettle, and if there is grit in him at all, it will appear. He is conscious that it depends entirely on himself whether he is to succeed or to fail. He feels himself face to face with the world, and is compelled to use all his faculties and powers to save himself from defeat. The

habits of industry, the love of work, the delight in mastering difficulties, the ability to put pressure on himself, and the independence of character which a lad thus acquires, pass into his nature as its permanent and most valuable ingredients. His income may be smaller than that of many of his contemporaries, but the man is ultimately of much more account than the income, and no circumstances have produced better men than those in which there was considerable hardship at first.

It must also be considered that the privations which press so heavily on some families, and which in some unhappy instances

benumb affection, do in the main afford opportunities for self-sacrifice and considerateness and concern for the common good which bind families together, and give a richness and beauty to the family life which you might have sought in vain had circumstances been easy and calling for no sacrifice.

Do not, then, quarrel with your circumstances. You may quite legitimately wish to change them, but hold firmly to the belief that there is no condition in life in which you may not fulfil God's will and do what needs to be done. Impatience, self-will, self-confidence, the pride of life, thirst for pleasure, romantic ideas, vanity, all that appears in youth as the

froth of its life and energy, is better removed by the chastening, sobering, chilling touch of privation than by a thousand sermons. But in other senses it is good that a man bear the yoke in his youth. He must put himself under control and discipline if he is to get the full benefit of his youth. All this control and discipline is intended to fit him for liberty afterwards, as all drill and gymnastics are meant to give the body freedom of movement, and to give a man the perfect use of all his powers. And all the while a boy is at school and under parental or other control, his natural instinct craves for the time when he shall be his

own master. 'His own master' —note the expression; for much of the secret of happiness and of liberty lies in it. The rock on which thousands of young lives are wrecked is a false and impracticable idea of liberty. To be free from control, to be our own master—that is the craving that haunts every one at the entrance of life. How is it to be achieved? Certainly not by flying in the face of the profoundest moral laws; every law you break becomes your tyrant, to arrest and punish you. There is no outlook through sin; that way freedom does not lie, but bondage. You cannot alter the laws of your own moral constitution,

nor can you alter the laws of the world in which you are; you can never become your own master by endeavouring to live as if these laws were not. These laws are, and rule every human life, and to run counter to them is to make it a certainty that you shall never be a freeman.

We must learn to correct the natural but erroneous impression we have, that doing whatever the lower parts of our nature prompt us to do is to have liberty and to be our own master. To allow passions, cravings, propensities, to rule us and govern and determine our conduct is to become the worst of slaves. External authority or tyranny a man may

resist or escape from, but when his own passions are his tyrant he becomes the most abject and hopeless of slaves. You see it in a thousand instances. The lad who but a year ago allowed himself to be led by his lower nature, and made experiment of some form of profligacy under the impression he was asserting his liberty and commencing to do as he pleased, has already found that he has become a slave to the passions he has indulged, and that they compel him to do their bidding, though he knows he is ruining his prospects in life, risking his health, sacrificing his character, distressing his best friends. There is absolutely no path to

liberty through wrong-doing. The road is barred that way. We are merely duped by our passions if we suppose that we are our own masters when we yield ourselves to do the bidding of our lusts.

Freedom comes through discipline; through absorbing into our own will the laws which govern our life: to be our own master is to exercise self-control, and allow that in us to rule which was intended to be supreme. When we submit ourselves to the rule of conscience and come into harmony with God's laws, approving them in our heart, then only are we free. We have then nothing against us, nothing

outwardly constraining us—our own will moves us in the same direction as God's law and will. You are not your own master while you obey the lowest things in you; you are your own master when you can make yourself do what you judge to be right—when that which you call yourself and which is the core of your being, rules all the rest that is in you. You yourself are something nobler and better than any of your members or any faculty in you; these are your organs and instruments whereby you work on the world around you, but you yourself are different from these, and are called to rule all these. Thus only is it

possible to become your own master.

To carry this out in detail may be said to constitute the whole training and trial of youth. He who emerges into manhood with self-control, approving heartily and choosing with his whole soul what is right, and able to make his lower nature do his bidding, may be said to have overcome. He who enters manhood a slave to any evil habit, with no strong self-control, weak, flabby, unreliable, a dead weight that adds to the world's bias to ruin—he may be said to have missed the main use of his early years. Like all blessings, our youth looks largest when we have lost it.

While we have it we think it the time for disporting ourselves before we settle to the earnest work of life; when we look back on it we see it was the only time we have for giving a tone to all that follows.

Coming to detail, then, we must exercise self-control in respect of all unworthy pleasures. The youth of a certain kind and brought up in certain companies thinks he is scarcely a man till he has tasted pleasures which he knows to be forbidden. The very fact that they are forbidden makes them objects of desire. He cannot reconcile himself to the thought that others are enjoying what he has not tasted;

that they have experiences he has not. There can be no question that to most dispositions 'stolen waters are sweet.' In wild lawlessness there is a charm which pleasantly contrasts with the monotony of business and the humdrum of daily life. New powers and capacities are called out. The paths of dissipation are new ground, and invite with all the charm of novelty. There are chances of adventure, of seeing new phases of life, inducements of various kinds which in point of fact do prevail with a very large proportion of young men. And these inducements present themselves not once or twice, but continually; and if in

one mood they have little power with us, in another they may prevail.

The true corrective of this bias towards unworthy pleasures is to be found in filling our life with worthy pursuits. Of course knowledge also helps. When one has seen a little more of life, the pleasures which attract the mass of young men seem so very childish, so false and tawdry, so positively repulsive in many respects, that one wonders where the charm is. The company in which paint and padding count for beauty, and coarseness or profanity for wit, is not the company any man of discernment or cultivated mind could find himself comfortable in.

The degradation on the part of the performers to which many popular entertainments lead, would touch any manly heart and make it painful to be a party to such degradation. In the cloak-room of many a place of entertainment you must with your coat leave your self-respect and all respect for humanity, and necessarily come out a poorer man, with less fitness for life.

But even when the pleasures that attract are recognised to be such as no men of any real stature and dignity could possibly stoop to, our self-control needs some other aid than that of knowledge. It is good to say to ourselves, These scenes I am asked to join

are degrading and delusive. Instead of proving my manhood by entering them, I show distinctly that my manhood is poor and weak, easily deceived, easily led, ignorant and undeveloped. It is good to cherish and strengthen our self-control thus, and by reading such healthy writers as Thackeray, whose scorn of all that is base and foolish and filthy and profane communicates itself to the reader and makes that seem contemptible which is contemptible, and that be repulsive to us which in itself is repulsive.

But the true safeguard is to fill the heart and life with higher things, to commit ourselves cordially to the Christian life, re-

cognising its attractiveness and finding in it enough and more than enough to interest, to stimulate, to satisfy. There is no salvation but in Christ. Only in fellowship with Him does our self-control receive adequate support. He has views of life, plans, present work in the world, which if we enter into we shall find ourselves lifted to the right level of human life and trained to all that is best in human nature. It is in Christ's service you find true life and true freedom and true manhood.

Another detail in which self-control must be exercised is in the books we read. During the last few years our literature has

undergone a most undesirable change. Books which twenty or even ten years ago would have been kept under lock and key, and would certainly have been on sale nowhere outside Holywell Street, are now obtruded upon us on almost every bookseller's counter. French novels, whose main attraction is their indecency, are translated and sold in thousands—a symptom of degenerate taste and of that pruriency which marks an unwholesome and undersized nature. Even a more alarming symptom of our degeneracy is that so many of our own novelists adopt so much of the French views of life as may be supposed to attract English

readers, so that now you will see in Christian families, and read by all the members of the household, stories the plot of which is offensive to decency. Yet so subtle and insidious is this moral taint that attaches to a large part of our literature, that many readers are unconscious of its presence—not because to the pure all things are pure, but because they who have for a while breathed a bad atmosphere are insensible to its offensiveness. Happily, English literature is rich enough to make it quite unnecessary for us to open one suspected volume. Form your taste on Scott and Thackeray, Carlyle and Emerson, and you will have no relish for

unclean and corrupting literature. Here again, if you feel you are losing something by not reading what others read, exercise self-control, and remember that what you lose is well lost—a tainted mind, a lowered tone, a polluted imagination, while you gain self-respect, manliness, and purity.

But again, those who have too much self-respect to find any attraction in such undesirable knowledge, sometimes show a similar craving, but in a higher and purer sphere. It is not uncommon to meet with persons who have a silly ambition to be recognised as having passed through a severe struggle with doubt and spiritual perplexity.

To have never trespassed beyond the pale of orthodox belief is in some circles counted tame. If we believe what our fathers believed, we seem to stand convicted of dulness of perception, of a slow conservatism that must fall a victim to the malaria of its own stagnation. We feel a desire to experience the doubts of which we hear other men speak; we feel as if it were discreditable to our understanding not to have passed through this mental phase.

Now there are two kinds of doubt which are very different in their origin and character, and which must be treated differently. There is the doubt which is almost invariably begotten in a

strong and independent mind when that mind first applies itself to the solution of the mysteries of nature, of life, and of God. There is also the doubt which is assumed, like any other manner or habit which finds favour in society; sometimes there is an affectation of weariness and *ennui*, sometimes of indifference, and so in some circles there is an affectation of doubt. It is 'the thing' to talk disparagingly of traditional belief, and to assume a sceptical attitude towards miracles and other objects of faith. The fictitious or imitative doubter may always be distinguished from the true doubter by his frivolous and

ignorant manner of meeting proposed solutions of his doubts. He who merely apes doubt, and seems to consider it a desirable mental condition, shrinks from conviction and seeks to perpetuate his uncertainty. To such as fancy that sceptical difficulties are symptoms of enlightenment, may be commended the words of the great philosopher who may be said to have consecrated doubt. After describing how he stripped himself one by one of all beliefs, he goes on to say: 'For all that, I did not imitate the sceptics who doubt for doubting's sake, and pretend to be always undecided; on the contrary, my whole intention was to arrive at cer-

tainty, and to dig away the drift and sand until I arrived at the rock beneath.[1]'

This is the attitude of the true doubter. He doubts, that he may arrive at the truth. He questions all his beliefs, that he may be sure he holds no error. He has no desire nor purpose to remain in doubt, but, from his very anxiety to be sure of the truth, questions and tests all he has been taught. For such doubt one can have nothing but sympathy; and where there is no vainglorious and ignorant bluster about our advanced age, but a reverential remembrance of the attainments of the past,

[1] Descartes in *Huxley*, 122.

a modest and honest scepticism regarding much that was believed in the past may not only be pardoned, but commended. For indeed our beliefs must in many respects be altered; and while we find no fault with those who accept all they have been taught, neither do we find fault with those who see that for them this is impossible. It is not through the understanding so much as through the conscience and the heart that a man becomes a Christian. And so long as any one is loyal to Christ because he is conscious that in Him he is brought into harmony with God, and because he desires to live in fellowship

with Christ and to serve Him, it is not essential that he should believe all that he has been taught. There is room in the Church of Christ for questioning spirits as for docile and credulous spirits; and as there is work for the one class, so is there work for the other. What is wanted much more than acceptance of traditional belief is tolerance, based on the clear perception that many articles of our creed are not certain, and that thoughtful men cannot but have different opinions regarding their truth.

While urging self-control in these various particulars, I am more keenly sensible than any of you how idle it is to *speak*,

to attempt to tame strong and wild passions by good advice, to lead leviathan by a nose-hook, to preserve you from pain and the haunting misery of a mistaken and wasted life by telling you of dangers you cannot believe in. I know that though I could read your future in your present, as it is certainly contained in your present, and though I could accurately and vividly describe it, that would not keep you from following your bent. It takes ever so little to make shipwreck of a life; one point of the compass makes all the difference between success and destruction. The spring of safety and happiness

lies deeper than man can go. Christ spoke an absolute truth when He said, 'Without Me ye can do nothing.' Without Him we can see some of our sins and fight against them, and if they be sins that threaten our social position or our reputation we can avoid and overcome them; but sins which are hidden from men or little thought of by them, sins which lurk in the heart and make us worldly and ungodly and sensual, these gather strength in spite of all we can do, unless we have the aid of Christ's fellowship.

I believe it is this which explains the melancholy fact that so many well-intentioned, and in

a sense Christian, people fall into serious sin. I believe it is this which explains why sins which *are* fought against, and which form the staple of a man's warfare against sin, go on acquiring strength until they burst upon him with an accumulation of misery and ruin which he little thought of when he thoughtlessly and almost innocently let the habit form. Until we fight against sin as the allies and subjects of Christ, as well as for our own sake, we seem to fight not in Christ's strength, but in our own. And if we think of our sin as mainly our affair, if we hate it mainly for the shame it brings upon us,

then when we are tempted by it, and when our own view of it is changed, the advantage and pleasure of it being now clear and the shame of it remote and dimly seen, there is absolutely nothing to restrain us from it. But if we habitually live with Christ and consider His will in all things, and that our sin brings grief to Him, when we are tempted, though our own view of sin is altered, we are conscious that His view of it remains the same, and in sympathy with His judgment we also condemn it.

I suppose every one of you is conscious of some sin, of something that lowers you in your

own eyes, and that sometimes makes you fear it is stronger than you are, and may carry you into a future of the darkest and saddest kind. There is, may I not say, something in the character or life of each of you which must be removed ere you can be all you ought to be. If so, what business more urgently calls you, or when accomplished will give you a truer satisfaction and set your feet freer for future attainment and enjoyment, than to clear away this recognised and growing evil? Could you have any truer joy this day than to be able to say that the thing which most troubled and threatened you has

been removed? Why should you not have this happiness, say, in a year hence? Deal seriously with these serious things — look forward to what awaits you in life. Be perfectly sure that through sin lies no path to happiness, that every step you take on that road must be retraced with the shaming conviction that you have been a fool. Each part of life has its own duties and its own opportunities, and at no future period can you come back into the past and make up for bygone omissions. The future periods have their own tasks, and are so filled with what is proper to them that what has been left undone in a

former period cannot now be attended to. You are permanently crippled in that omitted particular. It is in life as in a college curriculum: things are arranged in a progressive order, the first steps fitting for those which succeed. If a student idle through his mathematical year he finds himself unable to face the higher studies for which mathematics are necessary. And if he tries to go back upon his course and repair his neglect, then his strength is wasted and his attention diverted from the studies which now demand his entire energy. So it is in life. Every evil habit you suffer to find place in you

lowers your energy throughout life, weighs and burdens you, and holds you back from what you aspire to. The sin you admit into your life is not like a stone in a horse's hoof, that cripples for a few steps but can easily be knocked out and leave no trace: it is a morbid growth, it is in your blood, it taints your whole system, and is a weakness to the end. Turn then from all that is low, and defiling, and secretive, and ungenerous, turn from what is ungodly — be sure you are gladly living under the great law of human life, dependence on Jesus Christ,—and with Him there will enter your life, 'what-

soever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, . . . just, . . . pure, . . . lovely, . . . of good report.'

# DAVID: A STUDY FOR YOUNG MEN

DAVID being designed for a position of supreme influence, was prepared for it by a life full of difficulty and temptations.

Three of these were temptations which tested his trust in God. They showed to himself and others how far and in what sense he was actually depending on God; counting upon His help as a real aid, and believing in His providence as a sure guide. In two of these temptations he triumphed: in one he was defeated.

The first trial was of the most practical kind. When he went to the army with supplies for his brothers he found all Israel quelled by one Philistine champion. The lad trained on the moors, and who had single-handed hunted down the lion and the bear, was not likely to be dismayed by the bravo, huge and well-armed as he was. But David was confident of success, not because he was infallible with his sling, but because the cause was the cause of God. The story is told not as illustrative of David's spirit and prowess, but as proof that he was the fit king of Israel, because he best understood the God of Israel. Saul was

physically more powerful than David; he was a sterner ruler, and in some respects more of a hero than David; but he was always out of his place on the throne of Israel, because he had not meekness and humility enough to recognise Jehovah as the true King, and to trust in Him. So far as his rule went, the people would never learn to trust in the unseen, to believe in righteousness more than in sword and spear. With David from the first his fitness to rule lay in his trust in Israel's God. And yet at the close of his career it was under this very temptation he fell—the temptation to pride himself in the material of war rather than

in God. He began his career, saying to his armed foe, 'Thou comest to me with a sword and with a spear and with a shield, but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel; and all this assembly shall know that the Lord saveth, not with sword and spear, for the battle is the Lord's.' But let a few years pass, and this same man is found possessed with the demon of military glory, and, against even the remonstrance of the sufficiently unscrupulous but long-headed Joab, numbering his men of war as if his pride and his confidence were in them.

So serious an offence was this

that the loss of 70,000 of his people barely expiated it. The spirit David and his people showed has been the curse of ancient and modern times. A nation fighting its way to independence, conscious of a righteous cause, making every sacrifice of life and treasure to defend its liberties, is a spectacle full of inspiration. But the transition from devotion, from heroism and patriotism, to tyranny, luxury, and pride is often curiously rapid. The attainment of the desired end seems to extinguish every fine quality the struggle to reach it evoked. The sobriety of disposition, the humble hopefulness are replaced by self-glorification

and by that insolence which the free nations of antiquity branded as 'not only sin itself, but the mother of all sin.' Nothing is more ominous in a nation than military pride. Nothing more distinctly shows that a great people is missing its mark than when it begins to consider that its chief title to greatness is the fact that the masses of its people can be handled with the accuracy and unflinchingness of a machine for purposes of destruction or self-aggrandisement. The worship of what is strong replaces the worship of what is right, and the trust in what is material extinguishes belief in what is spiritual.

And yet who cannot sympathise with David? Who cannot detect that in his own life he has sometimes acted with humility and dependence on God till some desired end was reached, and then has forgotten to whom he owed his advancement and success, and has used for ungodly ends what God put in his power? The aid by which we gained our object is no more thought of than the plank by which the drowning man has gained the shore. No sooner do we gain our end than all the anxieties, the sense of weakness, the dependence on a higher power are forgotten, and we begin to look on all we have gained as if it were our own to

do with as we please. David's self-glorification was treated as a great sin because it was a great sin. It was a denial in act of the true relation he held to God. We are not acting as we ought unless we hold all we have, our position, influence, possessions, accomplishments, as means given to us by God for serving Him. The moment we count them ours, self-won and to be self-used, we deny our true relation to God and to our fellow-men.

It is strange that David should so have misunderstood the destiny of Israel and should so have forgotten what its true glory was. How different a career was he proposing from that which it

actually experienced! — no glorious series of foreign conquests and constantly increasing population and revenue, but reverses, captivities, famines, and every variety of national calamity. We cannot think of David's mistake without remembering how we ourselves once looked forward to a life very different from that which has actually taken place as our life. Once, like David, we reckoned on success and outward prosperity and steady progress towards complete attainment as the necessary elements of our future; but what have we found our life to be? not a mighty power on earth, but a baffled,

tossed, battered, humble business, completing nothing, perfecting nothing, achieving nothing worthy. To many of us life has brought little of that which we thought its chief good. To many of us it has been like the scramble of the shipwrecked towards shore—often submerged, often sucked back into the brine when we seemed to be just attaining a sure footing, only at the best keeping our heads above water, and glad to reach the shore, stripped, bruised, inglorious. But through everything that strips life of its glory, and has made it seem to you a poverty-stricken, struggling, disappointing thing, through all

that is hard and painful where you expected ease, God can better guide you to a true and permanent glory than through the life you would fain have devised for yourself. God can do it; but Israel to the end, through all humiliations, adhered to its fancy for such a glory as the other nations had; and so missed their true King of Glory when He came. Has our past experience actually taught us what true glory is? Are we now at our present stage more concerned about spiritual successes than about those that are material? Are we acting as if we had already learned that lowliness of spirit is more valuable

than success, and that heavenliness of mind is worth purchasing at the cost of every earthly advantage?

Sometimes the same one lesson is impressed on a man through many successive years of his life. You might suppose he must have thoroughly learned it long ago, but still the discipline is continued. So it was with David. All through his early life it was David's trial to know himself the heir to the throne, appointed by God to fill it, and at the same time to be persecuted, outraged, cheated, and hunted by the unworthy occupant of the throne. It was thus he was taught to wait God's time, to

allow God to mould his life, to learn self-restraint, and to put into practical shape his reverence for God's anointed king. Again and again it was put in his power to put Saul out of the way and set the crown on his own head. He had but to lift his hand, to give a sign to one of his followers; nay, he had but to turn away his eyes and for a moment to intermit his watchfulness of his followers, and Saul would have been no longer an obstacle. Saul, too, had been repudiated as God's king, and he himself had been anointed. It was by his own fierce spirit of hatred Saul had put himself in David's power. Was this not

a clear suggestion of Providence that David should make away with his enemy? But as King Arthur's knight Pelleas could not slay the sleeping friend who had so grossly betrayed him, but thought it sufficient rebuke to lay his naked sword across his throat, so David could not lift his spear against the Lord's anointed, but judged it enough to rebuke his enmity by showing him he had been in his power.

Certainly, had David interpreted providences as many people do, he would have driven his spear through his prostrate enemy, and not contented himself with the mild satire of removing it. Could anything be

plainer than that God had delivered his enemy into his hand, and that this was meant to be the sign that the time had come for his reign to begin? No doubt there were plenty of those hungry, reckless, turbulent spirits who followed him to tell him so. But his constant meditation on the sacredness of God's calling and on the nature of his relation to God as chosen out to be king had wrought in him a spirituality of apprehension not easily deceived. To mistake the leadings of Providence is common; it is one of the grand typical temptations which Satan tried with our Lord, knowing how often men walk into this snare and are for

ever after entangled and helpless. It is commonly supposed that God indicates His will regarding us by so arranging circumstances as to commend very emphatically to us some special line of conduct. If we are hesitating between two courses of conduct, and one of these is unexpectedly, and without any contrivance of ours made much easier than the other, we are apt to call this a leading of Providence. If a difficulty is thrown in our way when we are intending to take some decisive step, this is said to be a leading of Providence. In such circumstances the conscience that has not educated itself by a constant striving to discern between

good and evil is apt to be silenced, and the will which has not been exercised by following the decisions of conscience is apt weakly to yield itself to the circumstances which seem to indicate a certain kind of conduct. Your future seems to be arranged for you without your choice—the responsibility of decision is taken out of your hands.

But we are to remember that it is just so that temptation comes as well as Providence, and he who has not accustomed himself to discern between the two by listening to the dictates of conscience, generosity, honour, and propriety, will fall into the snare of Satan while he per-

suades himself he is yielding to providential leadings. It is the very characteristic of strong temptation, as of David's here, that we seem shut up to a certain act; things and persons seem to have been manipulated by a higher hand for just this purpose of bringing us face to face with this inevitable act. It is not only in the moment of passion that we fancy we are thus shut up to a certain course; but in looking back and calmly reflecting on the whole affair, we can only say we were ensnared, taken at a disadvantage, one thing working with another to deceive us and lead us to commit what a lifetime's

repentance will not blot from our conscience. We still see how finely adjusted the temptation was both to what is bad and to what is good in us, and how one event contributed with another not only to put us off our guard, but to make our very watchfulness mislead us; and how the very things which we counted leadings of Providence were the most deceiving of all. The true leadings of Providence must be found within a man's own spirit. If you have not prepared yourself for self-denying, upright, generous conduct, if your own nature is not made like to God's, outward indications of His will are quite as

apt to deceive you as to give you sure guidance. The leadings of Providence are in general not sudden and fortuitous, but woven in with the whole structure and course of our life. That which God has for us to do is indicated not by a few passing and incidental occurrences or coincidences, but by the outstanding facts of our position and circumstances. When, therefore, some officious voice whispers to you, 'Behold the day of which the Lord said unto you,' beware, lest you make a providence of your own untamed ambition and unchastened desires.

Such, then, was David's early

manhood—a time of perplexing postponement of hopes he had been encouraged to cherish; a time of sudden and intoxicating promotion, succeeded by the shutting of every door against him; a time of privation and danger; a time of false accusation and of wrongs done to his reputation, his affections, his motives; a time of temptation and excitement. During all his life with his rough, godless following, he never lowered himself to his company, never did what we are so prone to do—never laid the blame of deterioration of his own character on those with whom he lived. That he needed all the schooling he got

we cannot doubt, and that he profited by it we cannot doubt. In this period of his life was no sin of military pride and worldly glory as in numbering the people, nor any of the insolence and sensuality of the luxurious. God is wiser than earthly parents, and sees that it is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth, and that it really is through tribulation that the Kingdom is entered—that only to the poor in spirit can the blessedness of the Kingdom of Heaven be offered. You may not be able to *see* how other men are being schooled, nor how their natural propensities are being broken by long disap-

pointment and their hearts brought down by labour. But as in your own case so it is in theirs: there is something in their lot which makes them cry to God—a something of which they can speak hopefully or speak at all to none besides,—some anxiety for the future they dare not breathe; some grief that weighs like 'lead in their breast and lies like ice upon their heart'; some secret ailment which changes all life to them; some circumstance in their lot which, like a slow fire, keeps them always stifled, but never consumed; some bereavement which has turned the very pleasures of life into occasions of

keener regret. Through all such things our education is meant to go forward, as David's did. For what we are being trained we do not know; what qualities shall be required by our future lot in this or in the world to come we do not know; but He who leads us and shapes our course does know, and if we patiently serve Him now we shall find ourselves fitted for the service that is to follow. It may be your lot, as it was David's, to lead others to that spring of comfort at which he himself had been driven to seek consolation. The Psalms could not have been, had not the life preceded; and very probably that which will be most

permanent from your life will be that which was being sown, unknown to yourself, in the darkest days and most fruitless periods of your career. Seed-time is bleak, and cloudy, and chill, but they that sow in tears shall rejoice when the sheaves are brought home.

It may be remarked in conclusion that as in David's case, so in our Lord's: His training to be King was thorough. David found that God's consecration and equipment of him to the work he had to do were not completed by a mere outward anointing. Fitness for the kingly office was to be slowly and painfully acquired by an experience in which

every part of his character was sifted. He was compelled for years to live as an outlaw and as the associate of the lowest of the people; in those lawless times there were many who hung loose upon society and found a precarious subsistence by various devices, living by their wits rather than by their hands, by occasional windfalls rather than by steady labour; criminals, adventurers, idle and vagrant spirits of all kinds. Among these was the lot of David cast, and this fine spirit, capable of music and song and royal dignity, was familiar with vice and vulgarity, robbery and bloodshed. It was thus he learned experimentally what the

wrongs, and the crimes, and the temptations of his people actually were—a knowledge he never forgot, and which made him the genial and beloved leader of men he became. His quiet self-restraint and sense of justice and ability to make a reality of God, and to wait upon His will, impressed those rebellious spirits that flocked to him. At last the men 'in debt and discontent' found one they could love and trust, sympathetic in their misfortunes, and making no moan that, instead of a throne, he had to content himself with a cave, and, instead of recognition and homage, should be hunted like a partridge. Seeing how he carried

himself towards society and its laws, towards the king, and towards God, they felt ashamed of their own pusillanimity, and inwardly chose this frank, dauntless, and patient companion as their king.

And it was by no mere nomination to office that our Lord became true King of men, and causes us inwardly to choose Him as our leader. Straight on the back of His proclamation at baptism came His temptation in the wilderness, significantly hinting that only by sharing our experience and experimentally becoming acquainted with the actual difficulties of human life could He win the highest place

and the true confidence of men. The true King of men can win His kingdom only by Himself rejecting all false ideas of glory and by personally overcoming the temptations which enthrall His weaker fellows. He who is really to command the allegiance of men can reign not by hereditary right, nor by force, nor by bare official appointment, but by sympathy and the supremacy which absolute self-sacrifice gives. And therefore His path to the throne must be one not of regal splendour but of hazard and obscurity. Not recognised from the first as King, not pampered and sheltered and ministered to, not shielded from all contact with the rougher

aspects of human life, did Jesus come to His kingdom, but from His infancy so exposed to danger that He had to be kept in obscurity and grow up unrecognised as a mere man of the people, a 'common' man undistinguished in any respect from His fellows. And thus He came to know in His own person what ordinary human life is; and by meeting and overcoming the temptations of the boy, of the growing youth, of early manhood, He became perfect in righteousness. He was not made righteous by any outward appointment or aid unattainable by us; He fought His way to righteousness through all the obstacles we find besetting us, and

so He became the Perfect Man. His righteousness was a real attainment, achieved by a real conflict; and by this righteousness, by His being all a man should be, in every respect perfect, in disposition, in demeanour, in His attitude to men and in His attitude to God, in His words and in His actings, in the cheerfulness with which He endured, and the readiness with which He served, and the freedom with which He devoted Himself, —thus He won the true leadership of men.

It is our condemnation that we do not admire, love, and serve Him as we ought; that His painful achievement of righteous-

ness and His full sympathy with us do not draw us as they ought. It is our condemnation that light is come into the world, and we love the darkness better; that we have seen perfection and are not kindled to long for it, have seen perfect human life and know not whether altogether to approve of it, whether it is worth giving up all to attain. There is no condemnation so inevitable as our inability to cleave to what is best when it is shown to us. This is always the true gauge of our character and spiritual state. With what truth and ardour and practical result do we approve and cleave to perfect human righteousness as it is shown to us

in Christ? This is no question of evidences and proofs, but the much deeper one of moral affinities. No question more deeply concerns us than this: What is it we find most congenial? It is this that shows us what we inwardly and now are—good or bad. Is the character of Christ the one we truly approve, and is it that which is really and presently moulding our own?

## WHY BE RELIGIOUS?

THERE are many men, and especially in a practical and busy country like our own, who have no positive ill-will to religion, and who are quite decent and respectable in their conduct, but who have no interest at all in things unseen. Either they give an outward attendance on religious observances as a harmless traditional custom which they have not sufficient independence or perhaps sufficient interest to neglect; or they quietly glide out of all connection with religion

even of this formal kind, and give themselves entirely to business and pleasure and the pursuits which attract them. A busy man without much imagination, and with an easy, uneducated conscience, is under great temptation to leave religion to people that are fond of it, and to look upon attention to things spiritual as a harmless way of spending time if nothing else is pressing. The cultivation of religion is a pardonable weakness, especially in women and invalids; and though sometimes uneasy when they have to follow a friend to the grave, they acquire a convenient dexterity in evading all that suggests a world in which

the body and trade do not play all the parts. Such men, with nothing which may be called natural aptitude for religion, and with life running too swiftly for any pauses of quiet deliberation, are greatly to be felt for. They are missing the best of life and the whole of eternity; they are visibly narrowed by neglecting to develop what is deepest in human nature; and, as life goes on and the incapacities of old age creep upon them, they shrivel into an inconsiderable husk of humanity.

There is need then to ask the question, Why should there be such a thing as religion? Why should we not be content to eat and drink, buy and sell, if

possible enjoy ourselves, and die? Why is not this earthly life, with its various appeals to the senses, the mind, and the heart, sufficing? Is religion a superstition which wastes our time and disappoints our hopes, is it a survival we should discard, or is it a justifiable, reasonable, necessary element in human life? Am I nearer the truth or further from it if I am religious? Ought I or ought I not to be religious?

The first step to an answer must be the ascertainment of the meaning of the word 'religion.' Even in an apparently religious country like ours, there are the gravest misunderstandings of the nature of religion. If you ask

our leaders in the world of thought what religion is, you will be told that it is morality touched with emotion, or morality raised to an ideal height; or from other quarters the answer comes that to venerate the great mystery that lies at the origin of all things is religion. Religion, as actually manifested by men, is belief in and intercourse with the unseen superhuman powers that rule this world. It is man's response to the unseen power that is ever active around and within him, and upon which he feels himself to be dependent. It concerns itself with our relations to the Supreme. It springs from the consciousness of some superior

power with which we are somehow associated or connected, a consciousness which is awakened by what is experienced or observed in nature and in conscience; and it deals with this power as able to understand and respond to human feeling and desire, and it seeks by worship, by conduct, to come into harmonious relations with this power.

Religion exists and has existed in a vast variety of manifestations, varying according to the ideas men hold of the Supreme. The highest form of religion is that which recognises the Supreme as the Incomprehensible Spirit who underlies all existence, and at the same time is our absolutely holy

and loving Father. Our religion must therefore be a religion of the Spirit. To be in a real and permanent relation to the absolutely holy and loving God, we must ourselves be holy and loving. Religion concerns itself with our relation to God, and our true, eternal relation to God is attained when we attain to perfect harmony with Him. This harmony must not be the merely apparent and temporary alliance which might be effected by compulsion or outward arrangement, but the thorough spiritual unanimity and abiding fellowship which result from identity of will and similarity of character. Religion is not perfect unless we are truly

children of God; and until we are morally like God we can only in a superficial sense be called religious men. Religion, in short, is primarily and essentially a thing of the spirit; the true religion is that which brings us into our right relation to God.

The practical misunderstandings of religion which prevail among us are chiefly two: that which identifies it with morality, and that which identifies it with worship.

(1) Religion is not morality. It produces morality, but is not identical with it. Religion is intended to produce morality, and where there is no morality

there is no religion, save in appearance. Perfect morality is impossible apart from religion, for our relation to our fellow-men can only be understood when our relation to God is understood. Brothers are brothers to one another because they are first of all children of one parent. If we forget or ignore our parentage, our brotherhood becomes a name. The relation of the earth to the moon can only be understood when the relation of both to the sun is considered.

Often, indeed, morality seems more worthy of respect than religion; and so it is. It is more worthy of respect than a religion which has not produced morality,

for that must be spurious. Any religion which stands alone and separate from morality, so as to admit of being compared with morality, is worthless. Religion without morality is rotten; morality without religion is precarious, imperfect, without trustworthy root. The man who deliberately neglects religion, or has only examined it from the outside, is sometimes a steadfast and serviceable friend, gentle, patient, self-sacrificing, courageous in the various exigencies and relationships of life. Attracted by such characters, and repelled by the sanctimonious formalism and lax morality and hard selfishness of some who profess religion, men

are apt to say, the best religion is to be moral. But, after all, this is but a shallow judgment. Put out of court hypocrisy and superficiality, and what remains to guide our decision? This remains: that the man who has no religion is leaving out of account the most important element in human life. However high and fine a man's character be, it would be refined to a higher standard and raised to a perfect level were he to add to all his native worth the results of true fellowship with God. The merely moral man is necessarily an imperfect man. He resembles a branch of blossom carried through the streets by a boy who

has broken it off its stem. It is beautiful, but also pathetic, because it is detached from its proper root.

(2) A more lamentable misapprehension of the nature of religion is that which identifies it with religious services, acts of worship, rites, ritual, and ordinances; what Ruskin calls 'the dramatic Christianity of the organ and the aisle, of dawn-service and twilight revival, gas-lighted and gas-inspired Christianity.' Religion, though of the spirit, is maintained by outward acts of worship, and is aided by reading, prayer, and communion. But as these *means* are themselves more obvious than the results they

accomplish, they unfortunately become more identified with religion; and in determining whether any one is religious or not, attention is generally directed to a few practices and habits, whose real importance lies solely in what they accomplish, and not at all in themselves. If it be asked whether a man is religious or irreligious, such features of his life are cited as that he has family prayers night and morning, that he is regular in attendance at Church, and fond of reading his Bible. But nothing is said of the result of these practices in his character or in a Christ-like life. Thus religion comes to be identified in many minds

with what is external and ceremonial.

No misunderstanding of religion is more fatal. If religion is nothing more than attending Divine service with becoming gravity and decorously performing the acts of an elaborate ritual, then it is a pernicious, degrading burden which reasonable men ought to abolish. To encourage men in the imagination that they have attained the summit of human excellence when they can fast twice a week and make themselves ridiculous by old-world dresses and the antics of mummers, is to burlesque religion. To lead men to measure their religious attainment by their

diligence in any kind of ritual observances is simply to delude them. Religion, instead of being the very life of the spirit, which gives it its true place in the universe and its best development, instead of imparting to it principles which form the character in the noblest model, is thus transformed into a pitiful routine of mechanical performances which might be more accurately, and I venture to say more acceptably, performed by a soulless automaton.

Thus misconceiving religion, many persons abhor the thought of it; and necessarily, for instead of looking at it as the culmination of all human experiences,

the best of friendships, the noblest of services, and that which alone brings perfect development to human nature, they think of it as a harsh bondage which covers life with gloom, as the acceptance of some idle beliefs, and the spending of time and energy on silly observances, and as the introduction of an alien element into human life. So long as we feel as if life might be enjoyable without religion, but with it must be intolerable and dreary in the extreme, so long as we do not see that nothing but religion can make life permanently tolerable, we misunderstand both life and religion. Religion is meant

to make life hopeful, reasonable, and strong; and if to us it makes life harder, if it only worries us with a thousand meaningless restrictions and petty performances, it is an erroneous idea of religion we have. It is meant to give us liberty, the fullest development of our nature, and the utmost use and enjoyment of life; and if on the contrary it seems to stunt our energies, and to make us formal and even false, our religion is a mistake.

This, then, being religion, we come back to the question, Why should we be religious? Practically it is perhaps to death that we owe much of our interest in

religion. It is death which to all men, and necessarily, suggests the question whether there is another world, a spiritual world, independent of the flesh and other things visible. This one good at least we derive from death, that it compels us to ask what it hides and what it commits us to. As one by one men are irrecoverably removed from earth, our thoughts cannot but follow them with desire and inquiry. Each man must himself die. Each man knows that the day is coming when for himself and by himself he must make trial of the vast beyond. Suspended over the dark abyss, he cannot but question what it contains,

what forms of life may there exist. Will he there be guided and shielded by an intelligent, powerful, and loving spirit? Will he find there a life continuous with the present, governed by the same moral ideas, fulfilling similar purposes? Or will he be launched into he knows not what chaos of hostile influences, and adverse and calamitous conditions? Is his personal identity terminated, his conscious connection with things for ever broken, when he ceases to take part in this world?

But whatever be the exciting cause, the craving to find the highest Power, and to hold communion with that Power, is

well-nigh universal, and certainly is a characteristic of human nature. This craving has in untutored and unsophisticated races made impossible the question, Why be religious? And if that question now needs to be put, its answer is the simple one: Because it is possible. If there is a God, if there is a Supreme, then religion is at once our duty and our happiness.

The late Professor Seeley, with exquisite elaboration, sought to convince us that Goethe's saying is true: He who has science and art has also religion. (Wer Wissenschaft und Kunst besitzt hat auch Religion.) He sought to show that religion is worship;

and that wherever men worship—that is, devotedly admire—nature, there is religion. It is quite as true to say that no religion satisfies the human heart in which there is not personal communion. With a blind, material force we can have no personal communion. We ourselves think and propose ends to ourselves; we are conscious of a right and a wrong; and we crave communion with One who can also cherish purpose, and guide things to a righteous end. We must find a response both to our mental and moral nature, and this can only be in One who guides all things with reason and righteousness. The

world becomes rational and moral to us only when we believe in a God Himself rational and moral.

Only, then, if a man has unhappily become convinced that there is no guiding intelligence, no presiding purpose, in the universe, only if a man has come to believe that all things are material and mechanical, and that there is no spiritual Being who can understand and help him, can he with reason turn his back on religion. If there is a God, a Being in and by whom all else lives, a Being conscious and intelligent, able to understand us, though we cannot understand how He lives or what He is; if there is One without whom we

could not be, and whose will is guiding all things to one worthy end,—then plainly, to neglect all possible intercourse with this Being is to neglect the most important element in our life. To ascertain our true relationship to Him and to act upon it is our first duty; and as a Being of infinite wisdom must necessarily be a Being of infinite goodness, it will also be our surest happiness to know and to respond to Him. To live without acknowledging Him is to live in an unreal world. If our hopes in life take no account of God, if they leave out of account the determining factor in all affairs, with what reason can

we look for success and happiness? And if, indeed, God is not only supreme, but supreme because the one eternal Being, full of wisdom and goodness, how can we defend to ourselves the state of mind which can disregard His claims, which can make nothing of gratitude, nothing of duty, nothing of the hope of holiness and of working out the purposes of God? Religion has had the misfortune to be only once perfectly represented to men. Only once has man's relation to God been perfectly set forth and perfectly realised; only once has it been seen that religion is not a superfluous or ornamental addition to

life, or a thing separable from it, but the very strength and soul of life—as needful to our higher nature as the air we breathe is needful to our bodies.

Some persons are so happily constituted that faith in a Personal God seems ineradicably fixed in their mind. It has been hereditary through so many past generations that it resembles a native instinct. Arguments for or against the existence of God make no impression upon them. Such persons do not know how much they have to be thankful for. Perhaps neither do they know how heavy a responsibility they carry with them through life. But in many minds the

discrediting, if not explosion, of the old arguments produces a sense of uncertainty which is very apt to become permanent, and to have all the effect of pronounced unbelief. When we discover that our ideas about creation must be materially modified; when we learn that we have spoken much too confidently regarding the nature and ways of the Infinite and incomprehensible God; when a large number of scientific men assure us that we are descended from other animals, and are radically material and subject to decay; when we are assured that the human spirit cannot exist separate from the human body,

and that individual immortality is a dream, and the mere projection of our desire to live on; when it is explained to us that morality is not necessarily dependent on religious belief, but is rather a matter of race and habit and knowledge; when the air is filled with questions hard to answer, and when at every point what we considered settled has to be altered,—we understand how easy it is for men in our day to become sceptical. No doubt when one has time to examine in detail the confident statements of scientific and literary men, it is found that their weight is by no means so considerable as it seemed; but when

a man's own spiritual experience has been disappointing, when he has striven against sin and looked for help from above, and yet cannot see evidence in his life that his prayers have been answered, this gives the key of the citadel into the hands of the assailants, and makes his hand feeble to hold the gate against the invasion of doubt.

It has become fashionable in our time airily to put religion aside on the ground that we cannot affirm Personality or anything else of the power which underlies all existence, and of which the only thing we can know is that it is unknowable. There are always many persons

who cannot resist the allurement of a worldly life, and who are glad to avail themselves of a good pretext for not troubling about religion, God, eternity. And there are also men who with great distress of mind come to the conclusion that nothing certain is to be known about anything, and that to profess love and service to an unknown and unknowable God is for them impossible.

Now the truth which Agnosticism affirms—that God is past finding out, that a personal Spirit present with every one of His creatures, living personally in and through the whole material universe, is incomprehensible to

our mind—is precisely the Scriptural position that we know but in part and cannot find out the Almighty to perfection. And any rebuke which is calculated to abate the audacity and dogmatism of theological statement we certainly also accept with gladness. But when human inability to know *everything* about God is used as equivalent to inability to know anything about Him, we demur.

Were this the case, the study of physical science would be as promptly checkmated as the knowledge of God. For who can perfectly understand the forces with which he daily deals, and on which he bases his cal-

culations? No man understands what gravitation is, although it holds together the whole universe; no man knows with precision the origin of the world, and its destiny, and yet we know much about the world, and about those parts of it with which we have directly to do. We can only guess at the origin of the sun, and slowly learn its composition and probable future; yet we live by it, calculate its movements, enjoy its light and heat, and at all events are sure that it is, and has a beneficent connection with us. And, again, there are many things of whose existence we may be sure, although we find ourselves unable

to form a mental image of them. We know that the sun is some 93,000,000 of miles from the earth, but no human mind can form any clear conception of that distance. Similarly we may be sure that God has intelligence, will, something corresponding to personality in ourselves, although when we strive to conceive of such a personality co-existing with infinite and eternal existence we may be at a loss.

Besides, the man who discards religion because we are so much in the dark, and who smiles at the simplicity of Christian faith, might be expected to judge religion by its fruits. No doubt these fruits are not all whole-

some, but as undoubtedly religion has accomplished an amount of good which nothing else has or can. An American writer of distinction, a literary man and a statesman, in no way pledged to Christianity, has the following: 'The worst kind of religion is no religion at all; and those men who live in ease and luxury, indulging themselves in the amusement of going without religion, may be thankful that they live in lands where the Gospel they neglect has tamed the beastliness and ferocity of the men who, but for Christianity, might long ago have eaten their bodies like the South Sea Islanders, or cut off their heads

and tanned their hides like the monsters of the French Revolution. When the microscopic search of scepticism which has hunted the heavens and sounded the seas to disprove the existence of a Creator has turned its attention to human society, and has found a place on this planet, ten miles square, where a decent man can live in decency, comfort, and security, supporting and educating his children, unspoiled and unpolluted; a place where age is reverenced, infancy respected and protected, manhood respected, womanhood honoured, and human life held in due regard—when sceptics can find such a place, ten miles square, on this

globe, where the Gospel of Christ has not gone and cleared the way, and laid the foundations, and made decency and security possible, it will then be in order for the sceptical literati to move thither and ventilate their views. But so long as these very men are dependent on the religion which they discard for every privilege they enjoy, they may well hesitate a little before they seek to rob the Christian of his hope, and humanity of its faith in that Saviour who alone has given to man that hope of life eternal which makes life tolerable and society possible, and robs death of its terrors and the grave of its gloom.'

When Nelson was resolved to fight he put his glass to his blind eye and could not see the signal for retiring; and there are persons who refuse to see the very revelation of Himself which God has given because of our natural inability to discover Him. So long as we refuse to look at Christ we may truly say we see little to persuade us to be religious, little evidence of a God we can worship. But in Christ we do find a God before whom reason, conscience, heart alike bow and claim as our Supreme. In Christ we have the God who is past finding out made intelligible, manifest in the flesh. In Christ we find what proclaims

itself divine, a God in whom we see that infinite greatness is infinite capacity of love and service, a God who applies His resources without stint to the actual needs of His creatures, and finds in their guilty entanglements and hopeless misery but a fit field for the ampler operation of His love; who teaches us by actual demonstration that it is more blessed to give than to receive. In Christ we see that which makes religion possible, inevitable, reasonable, and full of blessedness.

# HINDRANCES TO THE ACCEPTANCE OF CHRIST

THE initial or radical hindrance to the acceptance of Christ is, of course, indifference to His offers. The swimmer who is floating in perfect enjoyment disregards the lifebelt that is flung to him. As our Lord himself said, 'They that are whole need not a physician'; and they who think themselves whole neglect His offers. A sense of sin and a hunger for righteousness and God are requisite for the appreciation of Christ. If there is no sense of

sin, no feeling of degradation in being stained, weakened, misled by our own faults, no pain and uneasiness at being separated from God in whom we live, there can be no response to Christ's offers.

## MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING HOLINESS

1. The delay caused by this initial hindrance is often prolonged by a misconception regarding the holiness which Christ offers. It is conceived as a Pharisaic sanctimoniousness, a condition full of restrictions, and in which the pulse of life beats slowly and feebly. Christ throws open the gates of His kingdom, but men turn away with distaste and aver-

sion, partly because to enter is to make a final decision and to shut oneself up to a limited and monotonous existence. Before doing so it is natural, especially in youth, to wish to taste life a little more variously, and to make trial of other kinds of experience. Fulness of life is a natural and a right object of desire.

The mistake lies in the idea that fulness of life can be found anywhere else than in Christ. He has come for the express purpose of enlarging, deepening, and intensifying life—'I am come that they might have life, and might have it more abundantly.' He is the God-appointed source of

fulness of life, and until we accept and use Him we cannot know the strength, the hope, the liberty, the largeness of life that God designs for us. A kind of life you may have out of Christ, but it is as different from the life you may have in Him as an arctic winter is different from a southern summer. A plant may live in a cellar, but it has a very different life if you take it out into the open sky and sunshine. Life out of Christ is life in a cellar: it is a gloomy, contracted, fruitless, dying life. A man born deaf, dumb, blind, with an imperfect brain, may be called a man, but you know how poor a thing his life is, even though he himself,

never having known anything better, may not be conscious of his lamentable condition. But so long as you fail to use what God has provided for your full life, you have not that perfect manhood He means you to have. There are powers in you undeveloped, and the best uses and joys of life you miss.

Do not look, then, at fellowship with Christ as an hospital to which you may one day be driven for refuge and for succour. Do not even think of it as an accomplishment which you might be the better for, but can get along without. But understand that it is the one only means by which you can reach the highest,

and become all that you were meant to be.

### MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT RELIGION

2. Another hindrance arises from the misconception which thinks of religion as concerned solely about the life to come, and as not even proposing to bring light and strength into our present concerns. The professed secularist and the practical secularist each says to himself: 'I have occupations and duties now which will engage all my strength; and, if there is another world, the best preparation for it I can have is to do thoroughly and with all my strength the

duties of the present.' Most men have felt the attraction of this position. It has a sound of manly, candid common-sense, and appeals to the Anglo-Saxon within us, to our esteem for what is practical. Moreover, it is perfectly true that the best preparation for any future world is to do with all our might the duties of our present state. But, after all, the whole question remains, What *are* the duties of our present state? If Christ is to be trusted, our very first duty is to believe in Him. This being omitted, all energy is spent in vain. If there is a God, then it is not merely in the future, but now, that we have relations to

Him and duties to Him. If He be such a God as Christ revealed, a God with us in love, then plainly our whole life must be coloured and influenced by His presence. God is as much in this world as in any possible world; and if so, our whole life must not be a secular, but a godly life, a life we live well, and can only live well, in true and frank fellowship with God. The mind that can thus divide duties into present and future, into godless and possibly godly, wholly misconceives what human life, not to say Divine life, is.

This idea that religion is a preparation for a future world rather than a benefit here and

now, a kind of sop to Cerberus, making entrance into the world of spirits easier, is a mere superstition, and has disastrous consequences. A few years ago, when Birmingham was overtaken by a sudden darkness at midday, and it was rumoured that the end of the world was come, some women appealed to the policeman for protection, and finding that even his powers were unequal to the emergency, they clubbed their pennies and bought a Bible. At such anile superstition we smile; but are those shrewd and clever men much wiser who all their lifetime have pitied the self-denying Christian, and at last, with as true and helpless an imbe-

cility, try to arm themselves in a suddenly assumed religion to face the life beyond?

The truth is, Christ is as much needed for this as for any possible life. No matter at what point you touch life, whether in science, art, literature, trade, or merely in family and social relationships, you can neither do the good you ought to do nor get the utmost of good apart from Him. Few things are sadder, and yet few things are more common, than to find men who have been counted successful, lamenting that life has been spent on laboriously doing nothing. From this disastrous termination Christ saves us. To every man He opens

a career. In His kingdom there is no such thing as a wasted life.

### DIFFICULTIES OF BELIEF

3. Another common hindrance is that which results from unsettled views and difficulties of belief. A young man is conscious that his opinions do not square with any confession of faith yet published in Christendom. He cannot accept all that the Bible declares to be true; the Old Testament miracles bewilder him; he is doubtful about many doctrines which are considered to be based on the New. In such a state of mind he thinks it would be hypocritical

and detrimental to his character to listen to Christ's offers and respond to them.

To such persons two counsels may respectfully be given. (1) Make sure that your divergence from the traditional beliefs of Christendom is well founded. At the present time we are deluged with second-hand scepticism. Literary men, who have paid no special attention to Christian truth, and are in no sense experts, lightly take up opinions regarding the supernatural, and give them currency in magazines and newspapers. But, of course, no one who takes his religion seriously would dream of accepting the views

thus disseminated, any more than he would consult such sources instead of a qualified medical man if he were seriously ill. Literary men serve an admirable purpose in our social economy, but that purpose is not to give advice in matters of religion. And yet the doubts and difficulties which bar the path of many a man among us, if traced to their origin, will be found to have arisen from these and other quite insufficient authorities. Let us, then, in the first place see that our doubts are real and well founded; and in the second place (2), and especially, it is to be borne in mind that it is not the acceptance of certain pro-

positions Christ requires of us, but quite another thing, personal allegiance. The question is not whether we can believe all that other people have said about Christ, nor all that they tell us it is imperative to believe, but whether we can accept Him personally as our ideal, our Redeemer, our Supreme. His one word is, Follow Me. He does not ask how much of this or that confession we have been able to believe; nor does He demand that we shall have this or that view about miracles or inspiration or the Atonement. What He does demand is that we shall give ourselves to Him.

## THE NEEDED SPIRITUAL CONDITION

4. Still another hindrance exists in a similar misconception of the moral or spiritual condition which is needful for the acceptance of Christ's offers. It is a not unnatural nor altogether unworthy idea that some serious preparation is necessary for taking a step so full of consequence. Deeper convictions are perhaps felt to be necessary, or a firmer resolve, or a more trustworthy purpose of abandoning sin, and a clearer and more final consecration to holiness. 'I must wait,' it is often said, 'till I am better than I am, till I have a truer

repentance, a more serious view of life, a stronger drawing to God. I am sorry I have not more feeling, more sensitiveness about my relation to God; but I do not wish to pretend I am anxious when I am not, nor to profess what I do not feel.' This is a very common state of mind, because it is difficult for any man once for all to grasp the idea that Christ has been sent to deliver us from every kind of evil, and especially from every kind and stage of spiritual faultiness. Uniformly Christ offers Himself to men as they are; and necessarily. Whatever be our condition, He and He alone can remedy it. Waiting will do

no good. To make ourselves more worthy of Him is a hopeless undertaking. Is it penitence you lack? But penitence of the genuine sort is only to be had at the cross. It is only in presence of the dying of Christ that a man can understand his errors and see them in some measure in the light of Divine judgment, that is, of true judgment. Is it sensitiveness, pain on account of your severance from God, shame on account of the degradation of your character, real biting hunger for righteousness? These you cannot expect to have until you accept Christ. This spiritual deadness which can neither see nor feel as it

ought, is the serious element in our condition; and if we could rid ourselves of this by any means of our own, we should not need a Saviour at all. The insensibility of which you are conscious, your surprising indifference to the spiritual aspect of things, your unconcern about your relation to God,—all this is precisely that from which you need salvation, and from which Christ offers to save you.

If, then, any one has been delaying to accept Christ because he supposes that some preliminary process must be passed through, he should recognise that this is a mistake. What Christ offers He offers freely, and on

the spot, and to all. No preparation is required. The preparation for rescue is danger; and the preparation for salvation is sin. Are you a sinner? Then to you Christ offers Himself. He did not say, 'Him that cometh unto Me with sufficient earnestness, or with a satisfactory repentance, I will in no wise cast out'; He did not say, 'Him that cometh with some fair prospect of being of use in My kingdom, I will in no wise cast out.' He said simply and unconditionally, 'Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.' It is His part to turn us into reliable and serviceable men. It is our part

frankly and humbly to go to Him as we are, and to accept everything from Him. It is your first, immediate, and most pressing duty to believe in Him as given to you by God to be your life. 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

### WAITING FOR CONVERSION

5. This state of mind is sometimes still further perplexed and entangled with the notion that as conversion is the work of the Spirit, we must wait until it shall please the Spirit to accomplish this work. Well-intentioned, earnest men with subtle mind

are often seriously disturbed and delayed by this snare. But thus to wait for the Spirit is really to take credit for being much readier for what is good than God is. We are willing and anxious to be united to Christ, but we must wait and wait for a delaying God. This certainly is to misunderstand God and to interpose a metaphysical difficulty where there is no practical difficulty. God does not mock us by setting before us an impossible salvation. Much that is necessary in saving us is impossible to us, but we are not asked to do more than we can do. We are asked to believe in Christ's ability to make us new men, and to use the means

He gives us of becoming new men. Others as unable as we have believed and have been saved. Whatever God commands us to do He gives us strength to do. Christ bade a man with a withered hand to stretch it out, to spread the dead fingers as he spread the fingers of his other hand. He bade him do what was an impossibility, but He gave him strength to do it. The man might truly have said, 'I cannot,' but with a higher wisdom he obeyed. He bids you live, and in His word there is life, giving you ability to do His bidding. Or, as Christ said of His own words, 'The words that I speak unto you, they are

spirit and they are life'—they carry with them power to use them.

### COUNTERFEIT CHRISTIANS

6. Another of the commonest snares which retard approach to Christ is the perception that the members of Christ's Church are not always exceptionally good men. Many so-called Christians are found to be slippery in pecuniary transactions, greedy of gain, full of spite, envy, and all uncharitableness. They act as a kind of deterrent on those who would, but for them, seek to live as Christians. Many who have had the misfortune in their early years to become acquainted

with this spurious kind of Christian, and have never been brought into close contact with genuine Christians, have their minds so prejudiced against the Christian religion that they never can free themselves of these prepossessions. This is unreasonable, but it does notwithstanding delay many, who if they were day by day in contact with incontestably good results of Christian faith, might themselves be Christians. Few men independently inquire into things for themselves; they allow unreasoned impressions to be made upon them by what they meet in life.

But as soon as a man does look at the matter with an un-

prejudiced intelligence, he perceives that in order to judge of the efficacy of Christ's salvation he must examine those who use it, not those who merely say they do, or even think they do. Many who bear the name of Christ have as little resemblance to Him as the men who parade the streets with boards resemble the picture they advertise. The mere name of Christian or profession of faith in Christ works no charm. We can measure His influence only by observing the lives of those who faithfully put themselves under it. You do not judge the efficiency of a drill-sergeant by the slouching gait of the man who has indeed enrolled

himself in a volunteer corps, but has never appeared at a single drill, and is shortly to have his name taken off the books. You do not judge of the efficacy of a foreign climate in curing disease by the dying man who has spoken much of going abroad, and professed great faith in the virtues of certain climates, but has never tried them. You do not condemn a system of education because the truants, dunces, and idlers are not turned out admirable scholars. It is quite as senseless to judge the religion of Christ by the conduct of men who have nothing Christian about them but the name, who could not tell you what the religion of

Christ is, and who certainly have never put themselves under His influence.

But we may go further, and assert that the very existence of these counterfeit Christians is evidence that there are genuine Christians somewhere, and that they are valuable and esteemed. In countries where there is no genuine coin, where money is not the medium of exchange, of course there is no counterfeit. The presence of what is counterfeit in religion or anything else should only have the effect of making us careful that we ourselves receive the real and not the spurious thing. But a man might as well refuse his week's wage

because a fellow-workman had received a bad shilling as refuse to have anything to do with religion because he has in some cases seen it to be worthless and false. He does not refuse his week's wage on any such silly pretext, because he likes the money and knows he needs it; and if he excuses himself from accepting salvation on the score that so many church members are none the better of it, it is obvious to all but himself that his real reason for declining salvation is that he does not like it or does not know his need of it.

It will be a thousand pities if the folly, self-deception, or hypocrisy of some professed Christians

should prevail to prevent or delay any of us from attaching ourselves to Christ. To accept such persons as the representatives of Christ is to pay them a tribute they little deserve. Fairness of mind, and a regard to our own best interests, should save us from accepting them as such. And independence of mind should be enough to lead us to sweep them out of our path and consider Christ for ourselves, and make trial of His influence in our own life. It is of ourselves we must at last give an account, not of others, not of the Church at large. We are individually as much bound to consider and to accept Christ as if His offers

came to us only. Other men are no more obliged to do justice to these offers than you are. Though the love of Christ had never yet been appreciated, it is your part now to appreciate it. Though the grace and fulness of Christ had never yet been used, it is your part to use His grace to the full. The man who has hindered you by his superficial profession and inconsistent life is no more bound to be a true Christian than you yourself are. And if you say in yourself, 'But I make no profession,' and think you thus sufficiently excuse yourself from all Christian living, you practise on yourself a very common, but a very shallow and

unworthy deception. You escape the guilt of an unworthy profession by the guilt of making none. And really between the soldier who refuses to go into battle, and him who goes into battle but runs away, there is not so very much to choose.

Ultimately the question is, How ought I to respond to this Person who makes to all men these demands and these offers? Here is One who has wholly given Himself to the interests of men, and by doing so has introduced into the world new hopes, who claims to set the world on right lines, and summons all men to aid in working out His ideas and will. Am I to refuse this

summons? am I to pursue my own selfish ends, disregarding this invitation to live in and for my fellows? Here is One who is certainly the purest, the strongest, the highest, the truest who has ever crossed this earth, and this Supreme Being offers to me a friendship of the closest and most enduring kind—what must I think of myself if I refuse it? What must I think of myself if I know that there is such a Person and I yet do not delight in the knowledge? if I know that it is possible for me to serve Him and I do not eagerly devote myself to that service? Is there not that within us that tells us that connection with Him is salvation,

and the very spring and joy of life? No man can lightly put aside such questions. You have a duty to Christ: what is it?

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